Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom

August 12, 2009

The President. Thank you. Please be seated. There are many honors and privileges bestowed on the occupant of this house, but few mean as much to me as the chance to award America's highest civilian medal to the recipients that are here today. This is a chance for me, and for the United States of America, to say thank you to some of the finest citizens of this country and of all countries.

The men and women we honor today have led very different lives and pursued very different careers. They're pioneers in science and medicine. They're gifted artists and indomitable athletes. They have made their mark in the courtroom, in the community, and in Congress. And what unites them is a belief that most—forgive me to those of you who are not Americans—but what we consider to be that most American of beliefs—that our lives are what we make of them, that no barriers of race, gender, or physical infirmity can restrain the human spirit, and that the truest test of a person's life is what we do for one another.

The recipients of the Medal of Freedom did not set out to win this or any other award. They did not set out in pursuit of glory or fame or riches. Rather, they set out, guided by passion, committed to hard work, aided by persistence, often with few advantages but the gifts, grace, and good name God gave them.

So let them stand as an example here in the United States, and around the world, of what we can achieve in our own lives. Let them stand as an example of the difference we can make in the lives of others. Let each of their stories stand as an example of a life well lived.

One of the last things Suzy Komen did before she passed away was ask her sister Nancy to make her a promise. Nancy promised her she would prevent other families battling breast cancer from hurting the way theirs had. What began with $200 and a list of friends has become a global Race for the Cure, a campaign that has eased the pain and saved the lives of millions around the world. In the months after her sister's death, Nancy lay awake at night, thinking about the promise she had made and wondering whether one person could really make a difference. Nancy's life is the answer.

While an intern at Miami's Jackson Memorial, Dr. Pedro Jose Greer came across a patient in a coma without a known name or address, a homeless man found by firefighters, suffering from tuberculosis. In the days that followed, the physician Little Havana knows as Dr. Joe searched for clues about the patient's life in the squalor under Miami's highways. Deciding that Miami's homeless deserved better, Dr. Greer founded Camillus Health Concern, a clinic that now offers care to over 4,000 poor and homeless patients. It's a life that might be distilled into a question Dr. Greer asks all of us: "If we don't fight injustice, who will?"

Professor Stephen Hawking was a brilliant man and a mediocre student—[*laughter*]—when he lost his balance and tumbled down a flight of stairs. Diagnosed with a rare disease and told he had just a few years to live, he chose to live with new purpose. And happily, in the four decades since, he has become one of the world's leading scientists. His work in theoretical physics, which I will not attempt to explain further here—[*laughter*]—has advanced our understanding of the universe. His popular books have advanced the cause of science itself. From his wheelchair, he's led us on a journey to the farthest and strangest reaches of the

cosmos. In so doing, he has stirred our imagination and shown us the power of the human spirit here on Earth.

Now, told he was too small to play college football, Jack Kemp became a pro quarterback. Cut by four teams, he led the Buffalo Bills to two championships. Football, he once said, gave him a good sense of perspective about politics: He'd "already been booed, cheered, cut, sold, [and traded]." [*Laughter*] So makes me feel better. [*Laughter*] A conservative thinker, a Republican leader, and a defender of civil rights, he was that rare patriot who put country over party, never forgetting what he learned on the gridiron: That it takes each of us doing our part, and all of us working together, to achieve a common goal. It's a life from which we can all draw lessons, Democrat and Republican alike.

After purchasing an $8 racket with money earned from chores, 11-year-old Billie Jean declared a goal to be the number-one tennis player in the world. Yet what we honor are not simply her 12 Grand Slam titles, 101 doubles titles, and 67 singles titles—pretty good, Billie Jean—[*laughter*]—we honor what she calls "all of the off-the-court stuff," what she did to broaden the reach of the game, to change how women athletes and women everywhere view themselves, and to give everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, including my two daughters, a chance to compete both on the court and in life. As Billie Jean once said, we should "never, ever underestimate the human spirit." Nor should we underestimate Billie Jean King's spirit.

Born and raised in Jim Crow Alabama, preaching in his blood, the Reverend Joseph Lowery is a giant of the Moses generation of civil rights leaders. It was just King, Lowery, and a few others huddled in Montgomery who laid the groundwork for the bus boycott and the movement that was to follow. A founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Lowery was later asked to serve as president. He agreed to serve for one year, but wound up serving, as he puts it, for 20 one-year terms. [*Laughter*] Throughout his life, some have called him crazy. But one of my favorite sermons that I heard Dr. Lowery once deliver, he said: "There's good crazy, and there's bad crazy"—[*laughter*]—"and sometimes you need a little bit of that good crazy to make the world a better place." [*Laughter*]

Born just a generation past the Battle of the Little Big Horn, a grandson of a scout for General Custer himself, Dr. Joseph Medicine Crow was the first member of his tribe to attend college and earn a master's. Before completing his Ph.D., he left to serve in World War II. Wearing war paint beneath his uniform and a sacred feather beneath his helmet, Joseph Medicine Crow completed the four battlefield deeds that made him the last Crow war chief. Historian, educator, and patriot—a good man, a *bacheitche* in Crow—Dr. Medicine Crow's life reflects not only the warrior spirit of the Crow people but America's highest ideals.

His name was Harvey Milk, and he was here to recruit us—all of us—to join a movement and change a nation. For much of his early life, he had silenced himself. In the prime of his life, he was silenced by the act of another. But in the brief time in which he spoke—and ran and led—his voice stirred the aspirations of millions of people. He would become, after several attempts, one of the first openly gay Americans elected to public office. And his message of hope—hope unashamed, hope unafraid—could not ever be silenced. It was Harvey who said it best: "You gotta give 'em hope."

When a young Sandra Day graduated from Stanford Law School near the top of her class in 2 years instead of the usual 3, she would—she was offered just one job in the private sector. Her prospective employer asked her how well she typed and told her there might be work for her as a legal secretary. Now, I cannot know how she would have fared as a legal secretary—

[*laughter*]—but she made a mighty fine Justice of the United States Supreme Court. [*Laughter*] A judge and Arizona legislator, cancer survivor, child of the Texas plains, Sandra Day O'Connor is like the pilgrim in the poem she sometime quotes who has forged a new trail and built a bridge behind her for all young women to follow.

It's been said that Sidney Poitier does not make movies, he makes milestones: milestones of artistic excellence, milestones of America's progress. On screen and behind the camera, in films such as "The Defiant Ones," "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," "Uptown Saturday Night," "Lilies of the Field"—for which he became the first African American to win an Academy Award for Best Actor—Poitier not only entertained but enlightened, shifting attitudes, broadening hearts, revealing the power of the silver screen to bring us closer together. The child of a Bahamian tomato farmers, Poitier once called his driving purpose to make himself a better person. He did. And he made us all a little bit better along the way.

Dolores Conchita Figueroa del Rivero knows the adversity that comes with a difficult name. [*Laughter*] I can relate. [*Laughter*] Known to the world by the name that has lit up Broadway marquees, Chita Rivera's career had an improbable start. Accompanying a nervous classmate on an audition, she decided to audition herself, and impressed the choreographer, Jerome Robbins, who would make her famous as Anita in "West Side Story." Sassy, electric—that rare performer who can sing, dance, and act—Chita Rivera revealed that still rarer ability to overcome when she recovered from a car accident that shattered her leg. She ended up retaking the stage, won a Tony for "Kiss of the Spider Woman." And like her unforgettable Anita, Chita Rivera has shown that life can indeed be bright in America.

The only girl in a family of four brothers, Mary Robinson learned early on what it takes to make sure all voices are heard. As a crusader for women and those without a voice in Ireland, Mary Robinson was the first woman elected President of Ireland, before being appointed U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. When she traveled abroad as President, she would place a light in her window that would draw people of Irish descent to pass by below. Today, as an advocate for the hungry and the hunted, the forgotten and the ignored, Mary Robinson has not only shone a light on human suffering but illuminated a better future for our world.

After graduating from the University of Chicago School of Medicine in 1948, Janet Rowley got married and gave birth to four sons, making medicine a hobby and making family her priority. It was not until she was almost 40 that she took up serious medical research, and not until almost a decade later that she discovered, hunched over her dining room table, examining small photos of chromosomes, that leukemia cells are notable for changes in their genetics, a discovery that showed cancer is genetic, and transformed how we fight the disease. All of us have been touched in some way by cancer, including my family, and so we can all be thankful that what began as a hobby became a life's work for Janet.

The glint in the eye and the lilt in the voice are familiar to us all. But the signature quality of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, says Nelson Mandela, is "a readiness to take unpopular stands without fear." Perhaps that explains what led the Arch, as he's known, to preach amid tear gas and police dogs, rallying a people against apartheid. And later, when a free South Africa needed a heart big enough to forgive its sins, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was called to serve once more, as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Tribune of the downtrodden, voice of the oppressed, cantor of our conscience, Desmond Tutu possesses that sense of generosity, that spirit of unity, that essence of humanity that South Africans know simply as *Ubuntu*.

Thirty-five years ago, a young economics professor at a university in Bangladesh was struck by the disconnect between the theories he was teaching in class and the reality of the famine outside. So, determined to help, Mohammed Yunus left the classroom for a village, and discovered that just $27 would free dozens of artisans, vendors, and rickshaw pullers from debt. Offering himself as a guarantor, he withdrew a loan, paid off their debts, and founded Grameen Bank, a bank that has disbursed over $8 billion, lifting millions of people from poverty with microloans. Mohammed Yunus was just trying to help a village, but he somehow managed to change the world.

There's a story Ted Kennedy sometimes tells. It's about a boy who sees an old man tossing starfish stranded by a receding tide back into the sea. "There are so many," asks the boy, "what difference can your efforts possibly make?" The old man studies the starfish in his hand and tosses it to safety, saying, "It makes a difference to that one." For nearly half a century, Ted Kennedy has been walking that beach, making a difference for that soldier fighting for freedom, that refugee looking for a way home, that senior searching for dignity, that worker striving for opportunity, that student aspiring to college, that family reaching for the American Dream. The life of Senator Edward M. Kennedy has made a difference for us all.

These are the 2009 recipients of the Medal of Freedom. At a moment when cynicism and doubt too often prevail, when our obligations to one another are too often forgotten, when the road ahead can seem too long or hard to tread, these extraordinary men and women—these agents of change—remind us that excellence is not beyond our abilities, that hope lies around the corner, and that justice can still be won in the forgotten corners of this world. They remind us that we each have it within our powers to fulfill dreams, to advance the dreams of others, and to remake the world for our children.

And it is now my distinct and extraordinary honor to ask each of them to come forward to receive their award, as a military aide reads their citation.

[*At this point, Lt. Col. Gina C. Humble, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citations, and the President presented the medals.*]

The President. Before we break up, why don't we all give an extraordinary round of applause to these remarkable men and women.

Thank you very much for joining us, everyone. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:07 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Nancy G. Brinker, founder, Susan G. Komen for the Cure; and former President Nelson R. Mandela of South Africa. Participating in the event were Joanne Kemp, wife of Jack Kemp; Kara Kennedy, daughter of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy; and Stuart Milk, nephew of Harvey Milk.

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